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## Managing collections in store

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We all know that when it comes to an exhibition no effort or expense is too great. The conservators leap into action to make every object look its best, and curators hurry to catalogue their objects. But most of the collections most of the time don't benefit from such excitement. Preserving them requires processes of management that make sure that the collections overall are preserved, rather than concentrating attention on individual objects. This means making sure that they are properly stored, and that preservation conditions are monitored: perhaps we should call this *macro conservation* rather than preventive conservation. The collections also need to be seen as useful: otherwise, why is it important to preserve them?

Storage is the most crucial factor for the survival of collections. It's also one of the most expensive. Storage needs high capital expenditure at least during the setting up stages and commitment to ongoing high quality operation and maintenance.

This paper will review some major concepts and issues to do with managing collections storage. I hope this will:

- Provide some new thoughts to do with how we preserve collections
- Give pointers to some important practical aspects of managing storage
- Prompt some ideas about facilitating access to the collections.

### What are collections??

I am sure you think you know what collections are, but there are many different kinds of collection and they differ enormously. For example consider these large museums as paradigms for others. What are some major differences?

Natural history collections	The Natural History Museum	70 million objects Archive for study
Painting collection	The National Gallery	2,000 objects Nearly all on exhibition
Science & industry collection	The Science Museum	350,000 objects 'you can see them work': to demonstrate science

These different kinds of collection can be placed at the points of a triangle. Obviously they will require very different kinds of care and storage. In the middle of the triangle are

local history and history collections. They are often a mixture of these different types of collection and the museum and the staff feel torn in different directions.

### Care of collections starts with collecting ...

The growth of collections is another important issue that affects the preservation of collections. They have increased enormously in the last century. Many museums still increase their collections without coming to terms with the implications. Some quotations:

*The British Museum*, Sir David Wilson

... in 1851 the scanty collections ... occupied a length of 154 feet ... and three or four table cases. The collections now occupy 2250 feet of wall cases, 90 table cases and 31 upright cases ... *Augustus Franks, 1896*

*Collecting for the 21st century*

... inadequate attention to methods of avoiding duplication and the implications for collection management have ... turned the dream into a nightmare

*Stuart Davies*

Collecting for the 21st century.

*The Nation's collections: are we virtually there?*

... at an annual growth rate of 1.5% the size of the UK's Collections will double within 47 years. A century hence it will have increased by almost 450%.

*Kevin Gosling and Tony Gill*

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and,

Desire makes all things flourish, possession withers them.

*Marcel Proust, Les plaisirs et les jours*

### What are we managing?

It seems to me that museums have not caught up with the scale of the collections they are now managing. They are still thinking in terms of running a small local shop – they think they know what's in their collections and where to find every item – but the collections are now comparable to the stock for a major supermarket chain.

Some issues this raises are:

- Growth in space requirements
- Resources: cost and other
- Monitoring quality
- Management
- Access and 'use' of collections

### Storage: the costs

Museums are often unwilling to meet the costs of setting up, equipping and maintaining sufficient high quality storage space to meet the requirements of their burgeoning collections.

*The costs of storing collections*

<p><b>Site related costs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Rates</li> <li>•Security patrols, staff or equipment</li> <li>•Grounds and roads</li> </ul>	<p><b>Building maintenance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Building maintenance: gutters, repairs, etc</li> <li>•M &amp; E maintenance + fire alarms + BMS</li> <li>•Insurance inspections</li> <li>•Pest management</li> <li>•Servicing access doors</li> </ul>
<p><b>Utilities and heating</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Heating</li> <li>•Electricity</li> <li>•Water</li> <li>•Communications, data connection</li> <li>•General utilities</li> </ul>	<p><b>Operation and management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Contract management, central estates, etc.</li> <li>•Cleaning</li> <li>•Office costs</li> <li>•Stores equipment - fork lift trucks, racks etc.</li> <li>•Staff or staff time</li> <li>•Travel costs</li> </ul>

**How can we manage storage over time?**

We need to make some magic here: turn what we know about quality into quantities. Managers, who decide how museum money should be spent, understand the language of numbers, so judgments on the quality of storage need to be turned into numerical measures.

One way of doing this is to assess stores against criteria for what makes a good store, using the Stores Assessment Forms. These forms were devised for the Science Museum, which consists of three museums with very different collections: the Science Museum, the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, and the National Railway Museum.

The first form asks you to collect statistics about each store. This will give the size of the various stores, and the amount of storage it provides or the number of objects in it. Then when you have analyzed in what ways your stores are good or bad (or in between) you can calculate what percentage of objects is in good storage, or bad storage.

The second Stores Assessment Form can be used to analyze the quality of the storage. An annual inspection of each store is very useful. Simply use one form for each separate store. Choose one box in each row, for each of the criteria. When you look at the form you will find that you can easily decide on the quality of the store overall: GOOD, ADEQUATE, POOR or UNACCEPTABLE.

The person in charge of storage and collections care should make the inspection together with the curators whose collections are in the store and someone from building maintenance. That way, everyone will 'own' the problem and be less likely to feel that they are being criticized.

There is one thing to notice: some of the criteria such as security are so important that if the store fails one of these then it fails completely. It is urgent to do something about this risk.

*Criteria for good storage*

<p><b>Building quality</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Location, structure</li> <li>•Internal finishes</li> <li>•Drains + gutters</li> <li>•* <i>Services: electric, heating, etc.</i></li> <li>•Energy efficiency</li> <li>•Preventive maintenance schedule</li> </ul>	<p><b>Space for storage + work</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Enough space for objects</li> <li>•Access to objects for moving, inspection, etc.</li> <li>•Proper moving equipment</li> <li>•Racks, shelves, drawers as appropriate</li> <li>•Object packing, protection, supports</li> <li>Space to work</li> </ul>
<p><b>Security, risks and safety</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•* <i>Security: Physical</i></li> <li>•* <i>Security: monitoring</i></li> <li>•* <i>Fire alarms</i></li> <li>•* <i>Fire extinction measures (if required)</i></li> <li>•Flood or services leaks risk addressed</li> <li>* <i>Safety for access</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Access</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Staff can work on collections</li> <li>•Outside researchers</li> <li>•(by appointment if necessary)</li> <li>•Access to collections by public</li> <li>•(elsewhere if necessary)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Environment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Temperature + humidity</li> <li>•Dust, dirt, birds, pests</li> <li>•Gaseous pollution</li> <li>•Light levels</li> </ul>	

\* *If the store fails any of these, it is automatically rated Unsuitable*

Using the figures on the area or volume of each store, or ideally the number of objects in it, figures can be calculated to show:

% storage space that the store provides  
 % or number of objects stored in it  
 in GOOD, ADEQUATE, POOR, UNACCEPTABLE conditions.

The results need to be written up as a report. It is a good idea to include some photographs to illustrate aspects that are good or bad. The numbers also make very good diagrams.

Also, notice that the form asks you to record the most important improvement to make to the store. (It might be, to give up the store entirely and find a better one.) You can make a 'to do' list of these improvements for each year, and review the list from the year before, to find out if the stores are improving overall. Often they do improve, and it is very important to acknowledge this.

The important thing is to make recommendations for what needs to be done - be positive! On the other hand, if there is a really urgent risk then you must identify that. How would you feel if the store burns down because of poor electrical wiring, or robbers break in because there are no alarms, and you didn't point that out?

**Levels of managing collections**

The process of management takes place at several levels. At each level, there are things that can be measured and managed. Don't spend all your life counting – decide what would make the most difference: such as the quality of storage.

- The collections of a museum in general:  
Strategies, policies, expressed in procedures.
- Specific collections  
Quality and plans for store buildings / spaces, person identified responsible, preservation management.
- Sub-collections  
storage boxes, equipment, preventive conservation needs
- Individual objects  
cataloguing, procedures applied, conservation treatment

### **“Why are we keeping all that stuff?”**

My current research project is addressing this. It will result in a book, title: *Fragments of the World: the uses of museum collections*, that will be published in 2005.

Most of the public are barely aware that there are collections. When they encounter them, they ask questions which it is difficult to answer:

“I suppose you use the objects to change the exhibitions?”

“I suppose people come to work on the objects for research?”

“Why do you have collections when you can't display them?”

“Why don't you sell some to people who will appreciate them?”

The best way to make sure that a collection is preserved is to make sure that it's useful. I have been researching the uses of collections and I have found many examples of how collections are being used and made useful and inspirational.

But there are still problems:

- Most of the public hardly realise that collections exist at all, apart from what is on display,
- There is no perception among stakeholders and funding bodies that they are used or relevant: they are more likely to ask the questions above.
- Funding bodies are increasingly apt to ask these embarrassing questions.
- There has been such a strong consensus that museums are about people that the feeling has arisen that they are therefore not about objects at all.

### **Uses of collections**

There is no universal answer to the question. As we saw at the start of this paper, different kinds of collection are maintained for different purposes. But some existing uses are quite surprising. For example natural history collections are much used by artists, both for representations for book illustrations and as the basis for creative art.

Different collections can be used in different ways. These seem to be some useful categories. Fill in the spaces with your ideas.

	Research	Education	Creativity	Memory, identity	Enjoyment
Archaeology					
Art					
Costume and textiles					
Decorative art					
Ethnography					
Industry, technology, agriculture					
Local history, history of science					
Natural history					

#### *Collections for research*

What are the actual and potential and uses of collections for research? Some collections, eg archaeology, natural history, are pre-eminently archives for research. What about other collections – costume & textiles, decorative arts? University collections – are they used for research any more? Some collections are not used for research, or very little – eg the Science Museum – few people study the history of science, and they don't use objects. What sort of researchers use collections - academics, amateurs, the interested public? What is the potential for research in the future? How can it be encouraged?

#### *Collections for education*

Which kinds of education? Schools, higher education, lifelong learning? To what extent can / are the collections being drawn on / used, to what extent is this just education staff who happen to be employed in non-school institutions and who are not particularly making use of collections? What does research tell us about effective learning through objects? Higher education: in particular the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford; musical instrument collections.

#### *Collections and creativity*

This chapter explores the inspirational qualities of museum collections. Museum collections include things that we can all relate to but which in a museum attain a strange mystery and psychological resonance. They inspire a response through many forms of art – art itself, architecture, design, music and sound, literature. Many artists use museums and collections as artistic media in their own right. In museum collections we find the tangible evidence of the development of our civilizations. More than just an

inspirational medium, museum collections are a primary means by which material culture is preserved and transmitted. They are a record of invention as well, whether technological or artistic.

#### *Collections, memory and identity*

*"In a way, all collecting can be seen as an ongoing attempt to cope with the fact that time goes by."* Since the past begins at this moment, all the objects in collections represent the past in some way, although precisely because they are held to represent past events they may at the same time play a vivid role in the present. In western culture, old master paintings refer to the past when they were made and which many of them depict but their possession also conveys immediately relevant messages about wealth and power, since it is the wealthy and powerful (individuals or indeed countries) that possess them. Objects representing military or political events may arouse strong views and emotions arising from the current political standpoint on them. In other contexts, artifacts from cultures such as those of first or indigenous peoples are sometimes seen as standing for the colonial past, leading to demands for their return to the present day cultural descendants.

#### *Collections for enjoyment*

Museum collections can be enjoyed! What it is that people like and don't like about their experiences in museum settings – since the first consideration is how to get them in through the door (or gate), what are the various ways that collections can be enjoyed? Examples are various forms of open air museum; collections or collections objects that can be used to perform or demonstrate their original function; through public storage: open storage or conducted tours of stores.

### **Conclusion**

My conclusion from work so far on the uses of the collections is that far more use is being made of them at present than we are aware of, but there is obviously a serious problem of perception. They are not seen as a useful resource, but no-one dares get rid of them ... yet. However, far more needs to be done. There is a wide range of attitudes to this in different countries. To achieve a proper use of these huge resources, museums need to take the uses of collections much more seriously than they do at the moment and give it far higher priority.

Usefulness of collections starts with proper care and storage: without that, they are unusable. Conversely, a useful and used collection is a well cared for collection. So we need to tackle both at once, but having found part of the answer to one of these it is essential to go on and address the other.

If as much funding, imagination and enthusiasm went into developing uses of the collections as it does into exhibitions we wouldn't have a problem!

### **Bibliography**

Keene, Suzanne, 2002. *Managing conservation in museums* (2nd ed). Butterworth Heinemann.

This book has much more detail on using stores assessments, and also on collections condition surveys and on approaches to management.

Keene, Suzanne, forthcoming (2005). *Fragments of the world: the uses of museum collections*.

Lord, B. and G.D. Lord. 1997. *The Manual of Museum Management*. The Stationery Office, London. Chapter 3.2, 63-86.

Throsby, David, 2001. *The economics of culture*. Cambridge University Press.  
This is a really good book on how to understand the different values of collections and other cultural materials. It's written by an economist who believes that there is more to life than economic value.

## **Figures**

1. Mega storage. Some objects are so large that it is easy to leave enough space for people to visit the store.
2. Large storage. Even large objects such as furniture can be stored compactly on racks. However, this is not good for visitors.
3. Medium storage. Whatever kind of object, there are standard solutions to how to store it. Even natural history objects can be stored on racks.
4. Small storage. Small objects, whether they are jewellery, engine parts or birds' eggs, are often stored in drawers within cabinets. If the objects are valuable the cabinet can be locked.



## EXAMPLES OF STORES ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING FORMS

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PERFORMANCE INDICATORS ASSESSMENT FOR 200\*\*

DATE: .....

### Information about individual store

Museum: .....

Store Name: .....

### Physical Details:

*Many of the details will be discussed during the assessment visit. However, it would be useful if you could complete the following:*

Floor area (square metres): .....

Storage volume (cubic metres, total): .....

Storage volume (cubic metres, occupied): .....

### Collections:

Collection type: *Large objects/ General collections / Photographic / Archive & Library*

Collection name (if applicable): .....

Number of objects (for Large / General / Photo.): .....

Metre run of shelving (Library & Archive): .....

Number of objects inventoried: .....

Metre run of inventoried (Library & Archive): .....

### Statements:

Statement on access to the collections: supplied / to follow (date) .....

List of achievements: supplied / to follow (date) .....

Explanation of good or bad PIs: supplied / to follow (date) .....

Target PIs for next year: supplied / to follow (date) .....

List of plans for collections for next year: supplied / to follow (date) .....

Signature: .....